HOW TO BUILD A WEREWOLF:

The arm bone's connected to the dowel rod, the cheek bone's connected to the cable release...

By Kyle Counts

With all due apologies to Patrick MacNee, Dee Wallace, Belinda Belaski & Co., it's clear that the main reason people went to THE HOWLING this spring was to actually see social delinquint Eddie Quist turn into a fang-bearing werewolf on screen.

THE HOWLING stunned audiences with the current state-of-the-art (or at least until the release of AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON) in monster-making audio-visuals: quivering flesh, bone-crunching facial elongations, razor-sharp fangs and claws that grow on cue, and the final towering creature itself—all realized in a series of cuts that leave the audience gasping and applauding, bewildered as to where the actor leaves off and the fast-change artistry begins.

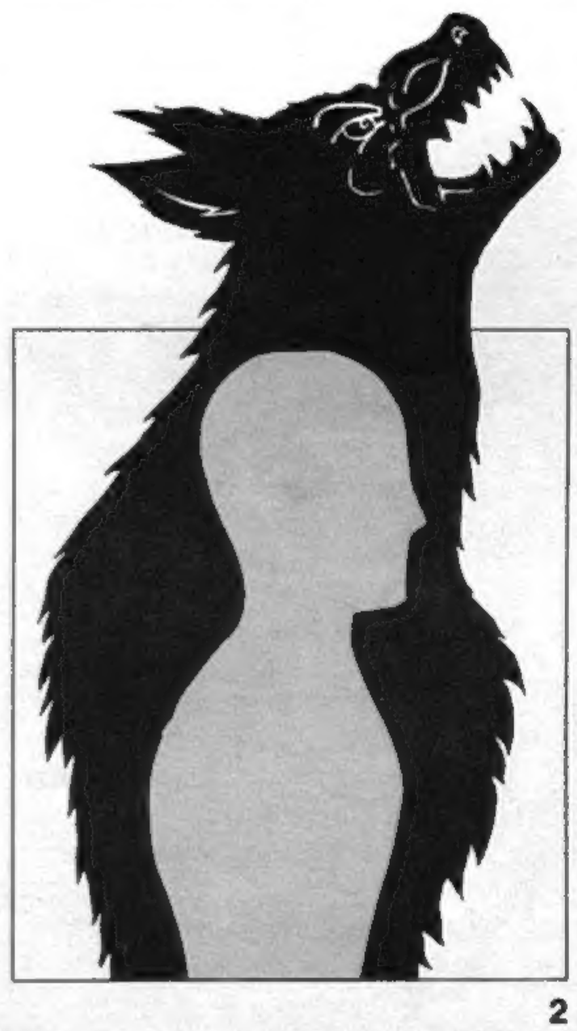
Although a great deal of attention has been focused on the work of the film's makeup supervisor and associate producer, 21-year-old whiz-kid Rob Bottin (now busy on the makeup effects for John Carpenter's THE THING), the task of transforming Bob Picardo into a giant werewolf was not, of course, a one-man project.

While Bottin concentrated his considerable talents on designing the various werewolf stages and executing much of the incredible on-screen transformation (through the use of air bladders and appliances designed by makeup artist Greg Cannom and a series of full-scale mechanical busts built by Bottin; see also 11:1:4), a talented crew led by Steve and Jeff Shank was actually responsible for the film's leading man: a full-grown, fully-animated eight-foot werewolf.

Both graduates of the U:S.C. Film School, the Indiana-born Shank brothers broke into film in the advertising department of New World Pictures. They ran the department for 14 months, overseeing campaigns for such films as PIRANHA and ROCK AND ROLL HIGH SCHOOL.

"Our first job in production almost seemed designed to make us hate it so much that we'd go running back to advertising," said Jeff Shank, referring to a stint on New World's HUMANOIDS FROM THE DEEP, on which they worked with a young effects supervisor named Rob Bottin. The three became close friends, and even took turns playing the slimy sea creature, though it was Steve, the one true swimmer of the group, who took most of the punishment. "I was stuck in 30 pounds of latex for upwards of 14 hours a day for three or four weeks," Steve Shank said. "As production assistants, you might say we were baptized on HUMANOIDS."

After HUMANOIDS, Jeff joined the postproduction crew for BATTLE BEYOND THE STARS, while Steve, writing original screenplays,



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responded—somewhat reluctantly—to an urgent call from Bottin to help out on THE HOWLING on a part-time basis, running errands, ordering supplies and making deliveries. "I could immediately tell there had been very little planning," Steve said. "Mike Finnell [the producer] and Joe Dante [the director] were getting very concerned about the delays." Bottin soon called on Steve to assume the role of effects producer—to budget, schedule and evaluate the effects work and keep close watch on the various artists—Bottin included—on the payroll.

By the time Shank had assumed responsibility, nearly a third of THE HOWLING's $200,000 effects budget had been spent, with only marginal results. The largest slice had gone for the construction of three "rocket wolves," life-sized fiberglass dummies layered with hair that were designed to leap through the burning barn and jump around the fog-shrouded forest locations. "They were fired from a launcher tank through a pipe that was connected into the rectum of the wolf," said Jeff Shank, who soon joined his brother as co-effects producer after finishing his work on BATTLE BEYOND THE STARS. "When maximum compression was reached, the ignition system fired and the wolf would shoot out through the air, as far as 50 feet across and maybe 15 feet high."

Although the "rocket wolves" were filmed for several shots, it was clear they wouldn't do. For one, they were just stuffed animals flying through the air—and they looked it. And the compressed air left a vapor stream trailing from the wolf's rear end, an unintentionally comic touch.

Bottin had meanwhile hired Dale Kuipers to build a number of werewolf suits to use in several brief cuts, discussing with him the possibility of constructing 30 suits or more to use in one group shot of werewolves on the march. "They were all supposed to have a sculpted foam base with hair, a head, hands—everything," Steve Shank explained. "That was a lot of work, even for a big crew, and Dale was working alone! I told Dale, who was obviously working under some duress at this time, to forget about doing so many suits and to aim for four or five at the most."

But it was difficult to produce even a single, acceptable werewolf suit. Three suits were eventually constructed, but each had major drawbacks. One suit used carpet-thickness fur fabric over layers of mattress foam, a second utilized intricately-weaved ventilated hair pieces built by veteran Josephine Turner (PLANET OF THE APES) at a cost of $20,000. Neither was successful.

"The problem with the suits was that the dimensions were modeled on a werewolf's scale and not a man's," explained Steve Shank. "They were too big in the wrong places. Ideally, a werewolf should be large enough to appear formidable, but svelte enough to be wolf-like. Most of the early suits

Opposite page: Jeff Shank blends crepe hair into the commercial fur fabric covering the full-scale werewolf puppet he built for THE HOWLING. The puppet was never used, but served as the basis for the suit Shank built later. Left: How a person fits inside a suit makes a big difference. 1) A prop head fits directly over a person's own. This simple suit, hardly more than a Halloween costume, was not considered for this film. 2) Rob Bottin designed a werewolf suit with a long, rigid "stovepipe" neck, but the full-size suit was a disappointment (see photos page 45). 3) The final werewolf suit, as designed and built by Jeff Shank. A block of wood elevated the head, allowing Shank to see out the mouth.

had bodies resembling black bears. Also, using Rob's specifications, Dale had sculpted legs that didn't successfully translate. The bone structure of an animal's leg is nowhere *close* to that of a man's." An additional problem with the suit—dubbed the "chipmunk suit" on the set—was its head, a rigid fiberglass extension designed by Bottin to avoid the conventional appearance of an actor wearing a prop head. Bottin's design contained a long stove-pipe neck with the head above, made so the person wearing it would hopefully achieve an animal-like quality by bending over to keep the head level with the ground. But the rigid neck didn't rotate realistically, and the top-heavy headpiece made it difficult for the actor inside to see and breathe.

The suit *was* used while the company was on location in the Mendocino forests, and can be briefly seen in the scene in which the transformed T.C. (Don McCleod) terrorizes Belinda Balaski. A third suit—made of fur fabric without foam padding—was also used on location for several action shots. "It was little more than a pair of fuzzy pajamas," said Jeff, "It was used for stunts, like the one at the end of the movie where the car hits one of the werewolves."

With time running short before the start of effects photography (live-action photography was divided in half on THE HOWLING, with all the werewolf effects saved for last), it was essential to come up with an acceptable solution to the werewolf problem. Jeff Shank said that *he* could make a successful suit, but Bottin was leery of trying yet another, and suggested building a special type of werewolf puppet similar to that used in some forms of Japanese theater. The puppet had one large advantage: it wouldn't be tied into the geometry of a man inside a suit.

"Rob wanted a simple puppet, just a working prototype," Jeff said. "When he first came up with the idea of a Japanese rod puppet, I didn't think it would work. But as I began designing and building it, I realized the potential it had, not the least of which was showing the werewolf in a full-body shot." He and a small crew took two weeks to build the eight-foot puppet in the driveway of Bottin's El Monte home, startling passing motorists as the creature took shape. The puppet was built up from a core of wooden dowel rods and hollow aluminum tubing covered with foam rubber, fur fabric and different colors of crepe hair which were worked into the fur.

While the completed puppet looked complex, it was remarkably simple to operate: hand-operated cables worked the flexible wrists and the mouth; the arms were capable of violent, "swiping" movements by operating the dowels that were connected to the elbows of the puppet; the fully-articulated neck allowed free rotation of the head; and the shoulders and hips swivelled realistically.

"Dante and Finnell were in ecstasy when we showed them the puppet because it was the first thing they had that was really shootable," said Jeff. "They even took pictures to show the execs at Avco. However it did have limitations: it couldn't, for instance, walk around the room, which is what Dante wanted for the scene where the werewolf corners Belinda in the office. But anatomically, it was a lot more correct than a suit ever could be. No one could possibly have looked at it and said, 'Aw, it's only a man in a suit.'"

But for all its capabilities, the puppet was bulky and required several people standing behind to operate the levers and cables (see diagram). Photographing the werewolf so the operators were not visible also presented difficulties. With just a little over a month remaining until effects photography was scheduled to begin, Bottin suggested building another puppet, capable of more complex movements, that could be strapped to the hips of an operator to give it mobility. Bottin also wanted to animate the arm movements with cables that ran inside the puppet, eliminating the problem of hiding the wooden dowels. But the Shanks felt another puppet would still have many of the problems of the original puppet, offer few advantages and not allow director Joe Dante any extra flexibility.

Jeff Shank again pressed for the construction of a suit that would extend down to the wearer's hips, modeled after the puppet so the two could be intercut. Bottin was still reluctant, and hired a machinist in Northern California to build a welded aluminum armature for a second puppet. Two weeks later the armature was delivered, to the dismay of the crew. "There wasn't nearly enough articulation in the movements," recalled Stave Shank. "The wrists, for example, only moved a fraction of an inch. To make hand movements believable, you need *big* movements.

"Jeff and I finally had to prevail on Rob to end all discussion of a second puppet," Steve added. "We *had* to use a suit at this point. There wasn't enough time to develop another puppet intricate enough to do all the things suggested by the script. Besides, Joe was never too keen on having to deal with a bunch of operators standing behind a puppet."

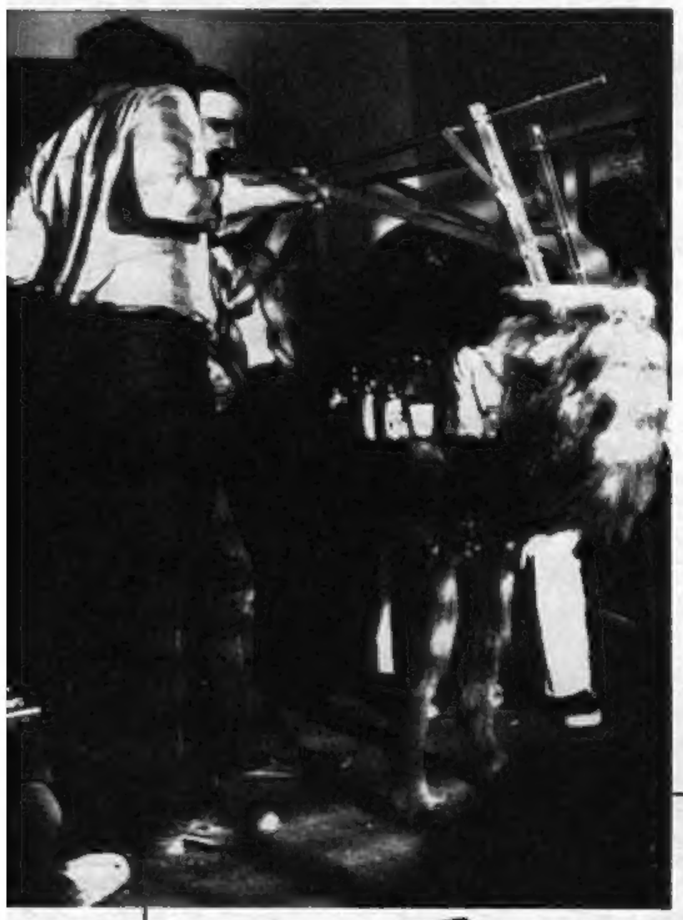
The task of building the suit was given to Jeff, since Dale Kuipers had been forced to leave the picture for personal reasons and Shank had worked out many of the design problems while building the puppet. "Once I took the werewolf suit on, I was on my own," Jeff said. "Bottin chose the look—a wolf that looked like a big dog with animal legs—and made the foam latex face of the werewolf. But I made the drawing of what I thought the werewolf should look like. It was my design, my baby.

"I had less than three weeks to complete the suit," Jeff added, "and there were a number of modifications I wanted to make on the puppet in order to solidify the final suit design. For instance, the first puppet's mouth was relatively small—only the front teeth and fangs were visible. I wanted a much more menacing mouth, one that would open a lot wider."

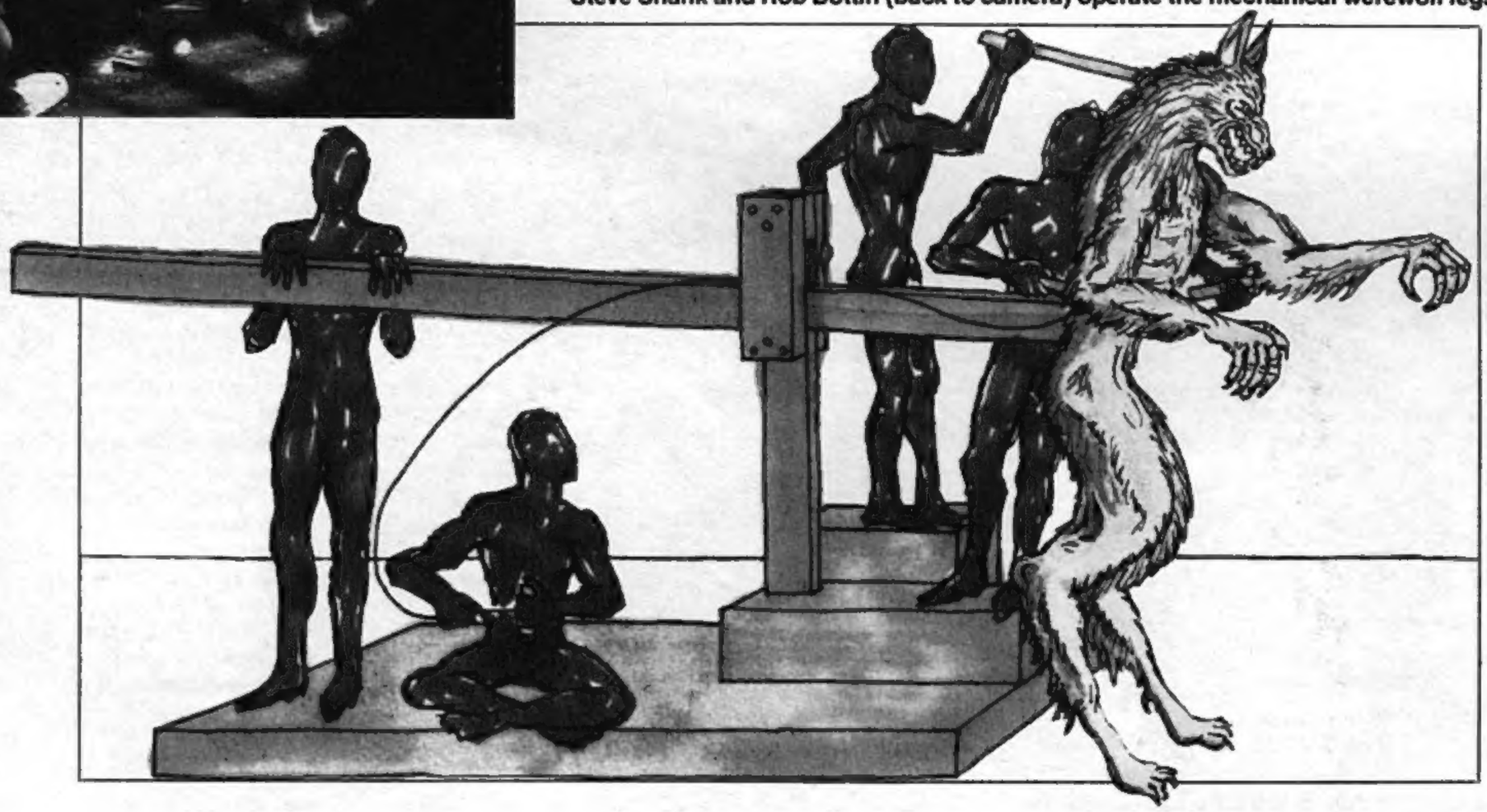
Shank resculpted the mouth, enlarging the teeth and exposing them all the way back along the sides of the jaws. Bottin modified his sculpture of the face and makeup artist Greg Cannom ran off a new slip cover latex face. "I also felt that the hands I had originally used on the puppet were too small," he said. "So while I began mechanizing the head for the suit, Shawn McEnroe sculpted a pair of enlarged hands, which turned out beautifully."

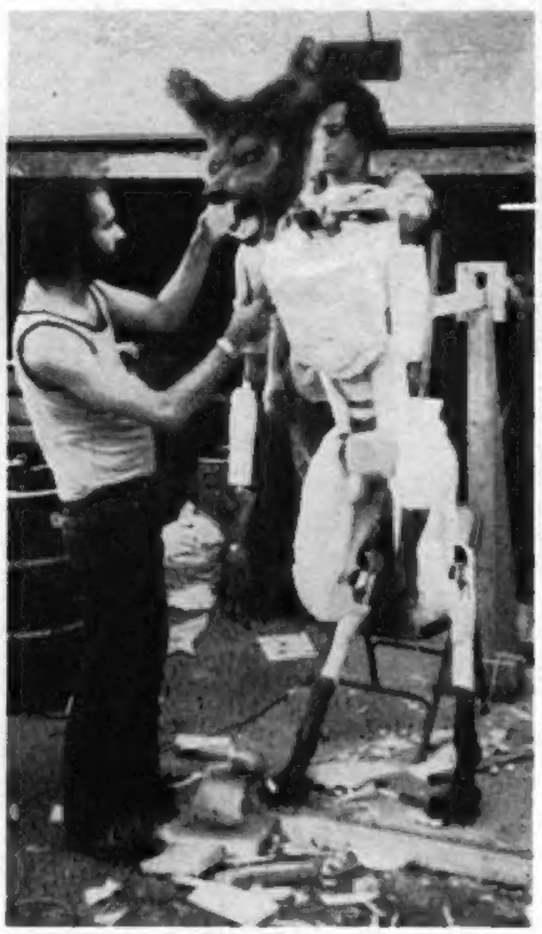
To provide legs for the suit, Bottin suggested cutting off the legs of the puppet, but Shank felt the puppet could still be used to good advantage and had Ed Jensen model a duplicate pair of mechanical legs based on those of the puppet. Shank also modified the puppet to better match the look of the suit, shortening the arms to match his own and outfitting it with a duplicate pair of Shawn McEnroe's new, improved hands.

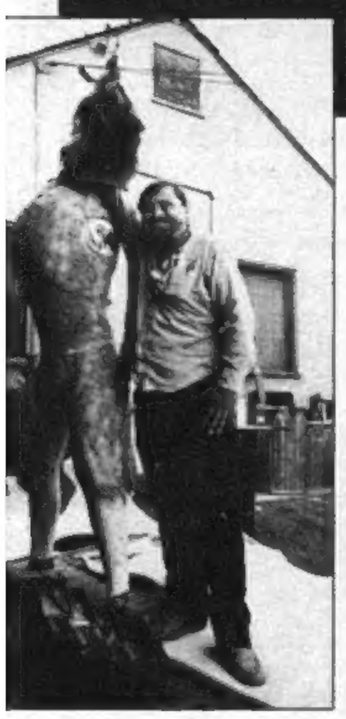
By now it was clear that Shank would not only be building the film's werewolf, but *playing* it as well (an



Below: To operate Jeff Shank's werewolf puppet, several persons were needed to manipulate the dowels that controlled the head, arm and body, and the cable-activated mechanisms that controlled the face and mouth. Right: Jeff Shank (right) and Shawn McEnroe work on the puppet in its early stages; layers of foam rubber "muscles" cover the wooden armature. Left: Steve Shank and Rob Bottin (back to camera) operate the mechanical werewolf legs built by Ed Jensen to match the puppet's.







Above: Director Joe Dante confers with Jeff Shank (in suit) between takes. Dante is crouching because Shank could only see out the werewolf's mouth. Far Left: Dale Kuipers poses with the un-furred form of the first full-sized suit. It was used on location (left), but scrapped due to problems with its bulk, and the "stove-pipe" neck. Below: Shank's sketch of the werewolf's face, indicating movements in the eyebrows (1), eyes (2), cheek (3), upper and lower lip (4 & 5) and mouth (6).

uncredited performance), since the suit was being tailored to his 6'6" form. "I was the only one tall enough, thin enough and dumb enough to do it," he joked.

The head was the first part of the suit to be completed, and Shank busied himself engineering a series of cable-activated movements, drawing upon the brilliant techniques developed by Rick Baker for KING KONG and passed along to Bottin for the ape in TANYA'S ISLAND [10:1:24]. "I realized the only way to divert attention away from the neck problem we had in the previous suits was to make the face as compelling as possible," Jeff said. "To that end I packed ten facial mechanics into the head, six into the snout alone. By giving the upper and lower lips movement, as well as each cheek, the quality of the latex foam created the look of real musculature."

The design of the suit allowed the head to rotate, and made it possible for Shank to see out the werewolf's spring-loaded mouth. The top of the werewolf head was elevated slightly by a block of wood to increase its height; the block was firmly attached to the top of a rigid, full-head skull cap that cut across Shank's face at the cheek bones and had large holes cut out for his eyes. The head was attached to the suit—a one-piece affair with a zipper up the spine—by a series of safety pins, which were hidden by the fur fabric.

The control cables—which were operated by nearly everyone on the effects crew at one time or another—were fitted onto the fiberglass shell and strung down the back of the suit, where they exited through a hole in the leg of Shank's black spandex undersuit. For the final touch, both the head and body were covered with varying shades of an aerosol hair-coloring product called "Spray and Tips" to match the existing werewolf footage.

When the suit was finally brought to the set—with Jeff Shank inside, of course—reaction was overwhelmingly positive: THE HOWLING, Dante agreed, finally had its full-sized werewolf. But little of that first day of filming ever reached the screen. "I was up three days and three nights to finish the suit, because time was running out," Jeff said. "Needless to say, the first day I was out with the suit, I was a zombie. I could hardly move."

Subsequent days were somewhat more productive. In all, Shank performed in the suit for more than a week, including the attack against Belinda Belaski in the doctor's office and the attack on the car of Christopher Stone and Dee Wallace as they sped away from the retreat. To create the impression of *several* werewolves surrounding the car, two of Bottin's puppet heads were also used in the foreground. Dante also decided to reshoot some of the sequences that had already been shot on location, and Shank was filmed lunging, swiping and growling at a number of targets.

Life inside the suit wasn't pleasant. Though weight wasn't a problem—as is the case in many makeup suits—breathing was. "My head wasn't very accessible to the outside because of the way it was positioned," Shank said. "It was somewhat claustrophobic."

With their screen credit of "Effects Unit Line Producers," the Shanks could easily keep busy with effects projects for years to come, but they're hoping for something more. "I want to get away from effects. I want to produce. I want to direct," said Jeff Shank. "I kept telling Roger [Corman, head of New World] that I wanted to produce. Now that I did THE HOWLING, he wants me to serve as art director and do special effects on one of his films. I do one film where I'm responsible for making a werewolf and automatically I'm labeled as an effects guy! I can do a lot of different things."

"We've got a number of things that we're thinking about doing right now," added Steve. "But because of the writer's strike, a lot of projects are pending. We've been consulted by a number of people. We're also in the midst of writing scripts."

For the Shanks, the ultimate brass ring is a producer's chair, where *they* get to call the shots. "My brother and I feel that producing is crucial, especially for films that require special effects," said Steve. "We're very interested in making our own films someday." □